

Making the most of crafts in Merseyside schools

Through a rigorous review Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool, were able to build a picture of the conditions and resources needed for collaborations between schools and craft-makers. Here, Jeff Adams, Sam Rhodes and Claire Smith, share their findings that help to identify the best practices, the benefits and legacy of artist-led residencies in schools.

During 2018/19 the Bluecoat Display Centre (BDC) in Liverpool set out to undertake a review of best-practice models for integrating craft-makers into secondary education to support research-informed practice in creative education. The project took us into a number of local secondary schools around Merseyside to meet teachers who had integrated artist-led working and residencies into their curriculums, to help us build a detailed picture of the conditions and resources that are essential for a productive long-term collaboration between the schools and the craft-maker.

During the visits we discovered great enthusiasm, and a commitment to the idea that making with professional artists and craft-makers in the classroom was a positive and valuable mode of learning for children. At one school, the head of art showed us the ongoing ceramic work that had been inspired by working with the potter Jim Robison, a maker of distinctive ceramic sculptures. His style and the impact of his work within the school were still clearly evident through the pieces on display produced by students. This illustrates the importance of one of the long-term legacies of a craft-maker residency, the development of skills and techniques for the teachers, which will continue to benefit students beyond the life of the residency itself.

Another legacy of residencies is the opportunity for students to see craft making as a viable career, providing children with tangible professional role models:

‘A residency provides an informal forum where anyone can engage and ask questions. Inevitably this will quickly lead into discussions about how you make a living, where you exhibit, the cost of work, travel and other very important practical considerations that you would never be able to ask in a gallery, all of which underscores that being an artist is a normal and achievable ambition for a potential career.’ Michael Brennand-Wood.

This is particularly important when children reach the critical stage in their secondary education where they must make subject choices, which will then have a significant bearing on their later career, and provides valuable ammunition for the department when encouraging students to take up art and craft-based subjects. The rejection of the arts, through lack of role models, or fear of unemployment, is often irreversible, and a professional maker’s presence in the school is vital at this stage to assert the value and significance of the arts in a visible and practical way.

The Crafts Council’s current ‘Make Your Future’ initiative has brought together higher education institutions, cultural partners, secondary schools and makers with the aim to revive the practice and passion for making in schools. A common theme raised during our research was the importance of teachers being involved in the selection of the craft-maker to ensure they were a good fit for both the staff and students, with both adequate expertise and pedagogical insight. In response to this BDC piloted a series of practical workshops led by craft-makers working across a range of disciplines, organised as professional development opportunities for local art department

staff. The workshops featured a range of local craftspeople and disciplines, including well-established craft-makers such as Rachael Howard and Michael Brennand-Wood, both enthusiastically embraced the principles underpinning the project. Michael says: 'In an increasingly pressurised academic environment, an artist working in a school is a real respite from formulized curriculums, a non-judgmental space to explore and experience a more self-motivated approach'.

Rachael's workshop showed teachers how to make simple papercut stencils to be used in screen printing. As she explained: 'The low-tech approach is highly effective and... once confidence is built up, the creative possibilities open up and participants are driven forwards full of ideas and excitement'. The workshop demonstrated the effective use of these techniques, which remove many of the complications, equipment and costs associated with more complex methods of screen-printing. As one teacher commented: 'Working with Rachael showed me how effective using just paper stencils could be'.

Other workshop sessions for teachers included a fused-glass workshop with Verity Pulford and a ceramics workshop with Attila Olah. We found a frequent topic of discussion during these workshops was the cost of equipment and materials, and a welcome outcome for the local teachers was the opportunity it provided for networking, which prompted discussions around the sharing of resources such as kilns. The workshops proved that the importance of residencies for a school's teachers is just as significant as the benefit to the students, as it provides much needed professional development that continues to benefit art departments beyond the residency.

The professional development workshops with the teachers sparked new ideas for the classroom, and following these sessions a series of workshops for students was also planned. These included two further textiles workshops with Michael, who taught students how to create three-dimensional or relief-based constructions using fabric, thread, metal, paper, paint, collage and wood. The theme of these workshops was linked to the curriculum and involved an exploration of line, depth, translucency, illusion and structure. He also encouraged students to integrate their personal interests such as music or architecture, which resulted in a diverse range of ambitious and experimental pieces. A student described their experience of working with Michael: 'Art for me is a creative oil between other areas of the curriculum ... In short art and craft make learning pleasurable.'

Feedback from students reflected their enjoyment of the workshops and the new skills they gained through it. However, while experimentation and creating samples are a good way to learn, student responses clearly showed that a tangible final outcome to a workshop or residency is required to ensure their long-term engagement.

To properly resource craft-makers and their projects, detailed discussions need to take place, and success depends on careful planning of staff and students' time. All teachers who were interviewed talked about identifying and selecting the right craft-maker to deliver a residency and that this must be in consultation with the school's head teachers and other staff in order that the residency brief be informed by, and relate to the curriculum.

BDC is now exploring ways to fund a programme of residencies of craft-makers in secondary schools in Merseyside. The research has given BDC researchers a guide to providing residencies for craft-makers in classroom situations, and will help to realise the widely-shared belief in the value of

making as a central part of the curriculum, allowing students and staff to benefit from the expertise of the artist and the broader holistic benefits of promoting arts subjects for learning and wellbeing.

The Bluecoat Display Centre was established in 1959 and runs a gallery, education and community outreach programmes, it provides a retail platform to over 300 selected contemporary craft makers based locally and across the UK. BDC is an advocate, facilitator and audience maker for contemporary crafts.

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